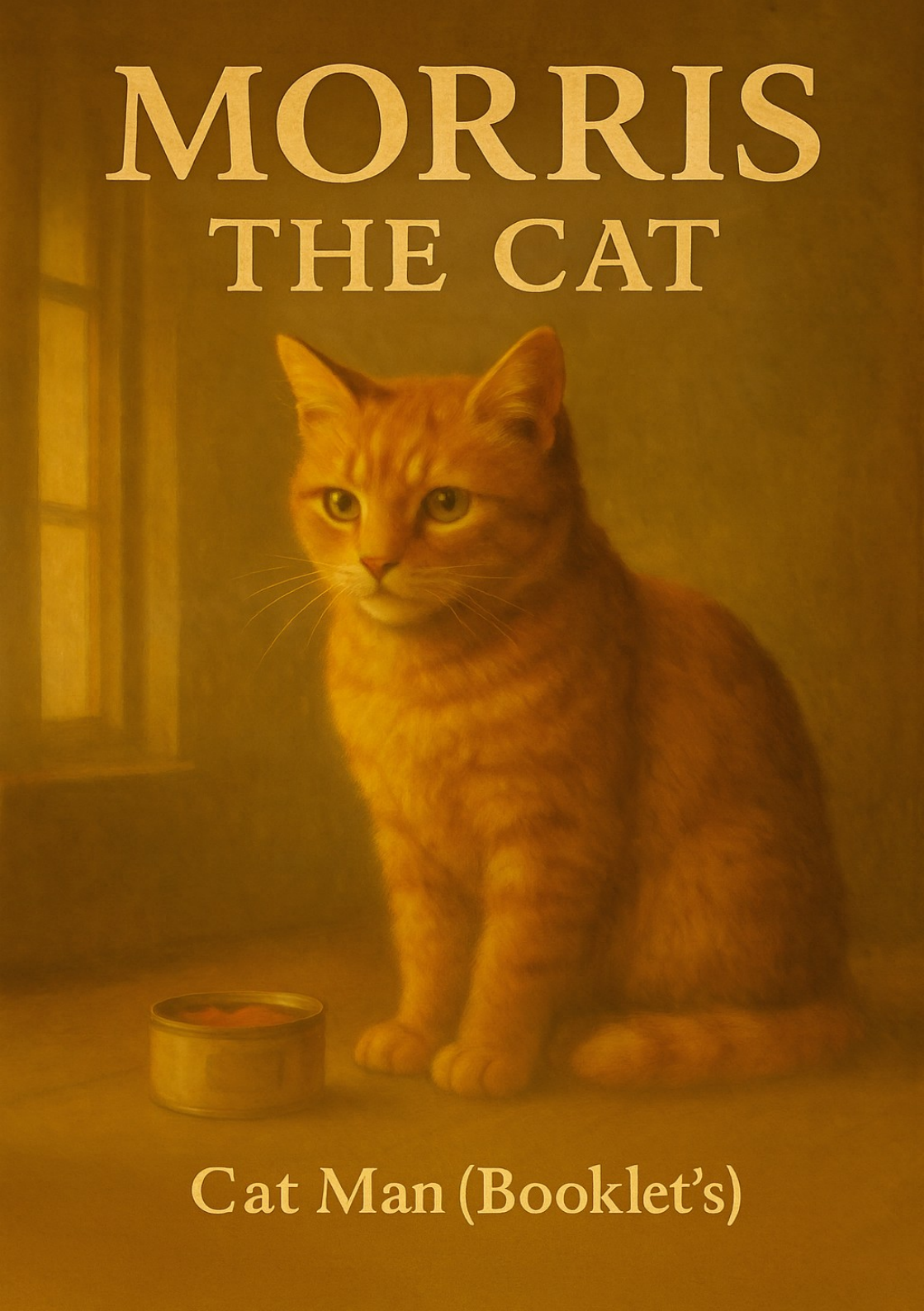
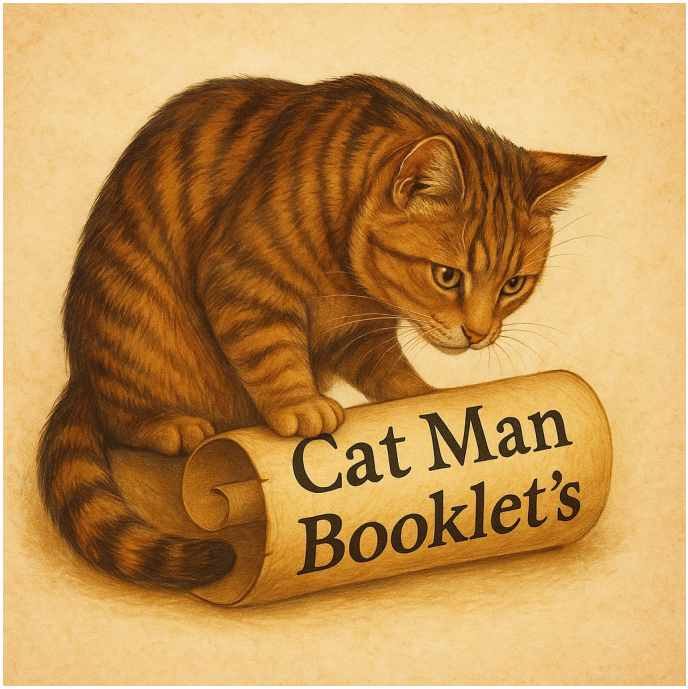
MORRIS
THE CAT



Cat Man (Booklet's)

Morris the Cat

A Case Study in Mascot Longevity and Strategic Branding Across Generations



Hrsg: Cat Man (Booklet's)
Godshorn (Germany) 2025

Morris the Cat
A Case Study in Mascot Longevity and Strategic Branding Across Generations

Morris the Cat, the orange tabby mascot for 9Lives cat food, represents one of the most remarkable and enduring successes in the history of brand communication. Since his discovery in 1968, Morris has blurred the lines between advertising, celebrity culture, political satire, and corporate social responsibility (CSR). This study analyzes the strategic levers that allowed 9Lives to maintain the mascot's relevance across five decades and several feline actors, with particular focus on the recurring "Morris for President" campaigns.

1
Strategic Genesis: The Birth of a Picky Icon and the Clark Gable Effect (1968–1978)

The foundation for Morris's lasting success was laid in the late 1960s through a deliberate branding strategy and a fortunate casting coincidence. The original concept developed by the Leo Burnett advertising agency aimed to create a unique spokesperson whose extreme pickiness would underscore the perceived quality of 9Lives cat food.

1.1 The Accidental Discovery and the Trainer's Vision

The story of Morris—originally named Lucky—is often described as the classic American success story, in which an unassuming protagonist rises to fame and fortune through charisma and sheer presence. Morris, an orange tabby tomcat, was adopted in 1968 from the Hinsdale Humane Society near Chicago. Reportedly, he was rescued by his discoverer just twenty minutes before being euthanized.

That discoverer was Bob Martwick, a professional animal trainer working for the renowned agency Leo Burnett. Martwick immediately recognized a special charisma and on-camera presence in the cat—something beyond the qualities of an ordinary animal actor. The creation of Morris was therefore a calculated move by a major advertising firm: to develop a charismatic yet irreplaceable feline spokesperson. Rooting the mascot's

entire identity in an animal-shelter success story—a rescued cat who became a star—gave the brand an ethical foundation from the very beginning.

Animal trainer Bob Martwick rescued the orange shelter cat only twenty minutes before euthanasia—the beginning of a remarkable career.

Animal trainer Bob Martwick rescued the orange shelter cat only twenty minutes before euthanasia — the beginning of a remarkable career.

1.2 The Persona: The Clark Gable of Cats and the Picky Anti-Hero

The defining moment came during the 9Lives commercial casting. Morris demonstrated an unusual mix of arrogance and self-confidence: he leapt onto the table, walked straight up to the art director, nudged him with his head, and calmly sat down. That boldness led the art director to declare him "the Clark Gable of cats—the King of Hollywood."

This celebrity comparison immediately anthropomorphized Morris, endowing him with a sophisticated, slightly arrogant personality that transcended ordinary product endorsement. Morris was positioned as "the world's most finicky cat," pointedly eating only 9Lives cat food. This defining character trait became the cornerstone of the campaign.

The 9Lives strategy was not to show cats simply eating the product—it was to monetize feline pickiness. By portraying Morris as a refined, high-status character, the brand implied that a pet's selective taste reflected its owner's superior judgment. This gave cat owners psychological validation—and implicit permission—to purchase a premium product worthy of their cat's "star quality." The persona was reinforced by a humorous, sardonic voice-over that delivered Morris's disdainful commentary on lesser foods.

1.3 Dominance in Television Advertising (1969–1978)

Following his debut in 1969, the original Morris (Morris I) appeared in an impressive fifty-eight television commercials through 1978. The campaign became one of the most successful and memorable in American TV history, making Morris a household name.

A key factor in this dominance was the voice. The dry, witty narration conveying Morris's inner thoughts about inferior alternatives was performed by voice actor John Erwin, also known for voicing *He-Man*.

Behind the scenes: the first Morris during the filming of a 9Lives commercial. His calm demeanor and "star gaze" made him a favorite with audiences.

2.
Cultural Capitalization, Crossover Fame, and Legacy

Morris quickly managed to move beyond commercial advertising and became a genuine media celebrity, building a form of cultural capital that would sustain the brand for generations.

2.1 Mainstream Media and Hollywood Validation

The 9Lives strategy aimed to establish Morris as an authentic star. This validation came through awards and film appearances. Morris won the PATSY Award (Picture Animal Top Star of the Year) twice—in 1972 and 1973—the animal equivalent of an Oscar. This recognition confirmed his "Clark Gable" label and lent him credibility far beyond advertising.

The success extended into Hollywood. Morris made his film debut in 1973, starring alongside Burt Reynolds and Dyan Cannon in *Shamus*. His media presence was enormous. He was named *Animal Star of the Year* by *US Magazine* and appeared in high-profile primetime television specials such as *Morris' Salute to American Pets* and on talk shows including *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Good Morning America*.

Morris's success rested on the synergy between Hollywood validation and advertising effectiveness. The movie roles and awards legitimized the fictional persona of the finicky tomcat, while the commercials, in turn, sustained his celebrity status. This feedback loop ensured

that his fame enhanced the ads—and the ads reinforced his fame.

2.2 Literary Career and Fan Engagement

Morris's popularity also thrived beyond visual media. He "authored" three books and became the subject of an intimate 1974 biography titled *Morris: An Intimate Biography*.

The scale of his fame could be measured by public response: Morris received such an overwhelming volume of fan mail—including marriage proposals from both cats and humans—that he required a personal secretary to handle it all. This phenomenon represented an early, highly effective model of influencer marketing long before digital platforms existed. Creating that deep emotional bond made fans personally invested in the star's story—an element that later proved vital when the brand shifted its message toward animal welfare.

2.3 The Garfield Prototype Connection

Morris's cultural reach also extended into pop culture. He is widely regarded as a prototype for Jim Davis's comic creation *Garfield the Cat*. Both characters are described as large orange tomcats with distinctive attitude. This connection embedded the cultural DNA of the 9Lives mascot deep within global pop culture, preserving his recognizability even as the original television commercials faded from memory.

3.
Longevity Through Strategic Succession and Ethical Branding

Keeping the Morris brand alive after the original cat's death required disciplined management of the mascot's succession and a strategic realignment toward animal welfare and corporate social responsibility.

3.1 Managing the Mascot Line (Morris I, II, III, IV)

The original Morris (Morris I) passed away on July 7, 1978, in Chicago at the age of seventeen. His death was significant enough to make newspaper headlines around the world.

Despite the loss, the character of Morris the Cat endured. In total, three other cats have portrayed the mascot, with newer reports referring to a current iteration known as Morris IV. The key strategic rule behind the brand's longevity was simple: every cat playing Morris must be a rescued shelter animal.

The seamless transfer of the role among different cats proved that Morris functioned as a perfected brand construct—its value resting on persona, not on a single living celebrity. This continuity, binding the mascot itself to the mission of animal rescue, gave 9Lives the ethical consistency needed to sustain the brand for decades.

Morris II was discovered by Bob Martwick in New England, appeared in campaigns for fifteen years, and died in 1997. After a brief tenure by Morris III, the

current Morris IV now lives with his trainer Rose Ordile in Los Angeles.

The successors to Morris the Cat—all adopted from animal shelters—have kept the mascot a symbol of compassion and brand continuity.

3.2 The True Purpose: Advocate for Animals in Need

Over time, the 9Lives message shifted from simple product preference to an ethical mission, branded as *Morris's True Purrpose*. Morris became an advocate for animals in need, promoting cat adoption so that every cat could "live the good life," since every feline has the right to *prospurr*.

This advocacy began early, with school visits during the "Be Kind to Animals Week." Over the years it evolved into major campaigns such as *Morris's Million Cat Rescue*, which helped rehome one million cats.

Strategically, this transition from product quality to ethical responsibility was pivotal. While early campaigns marketed persuasion ("Morris chooses 9Lives"), later messaging focused on moral engagement. Buying 9Lives was reframed as a socially responsible act—supporting the *Advo-cat* himself.

3.3 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Brand Integrity

9Lives has repeatedly used Morris's reputation to launch modern CSR initiatives adapted to changing media landscapes. The 2013 *Morris's Rescue Watch* campaign, for instance, capitalized on the rise of viral cat videos: for every view, 9Lives donated one meal to animal shelters—up to one million meals—seamlessly blending philanthropy with digital engagement.

Even in the digital age, the mascot maintained star status. In 2015, Morris appeared as the "feline tech correspondent" at the SXSW Festival. In 2018, he celebrated his fiftieth adoption anniversary by sponsoring the adoption village and hosting meet-and-greets at CatCon. All these actions positioned 9Lives not merely as a pet-food brand but as a driving force within the broader animal-welfare ecosystem.

4.
The Paradox of Political Parody: The "Morris for President" Campaigns

The recurring "Morris for President" campaigns represent a remarkably clever public-relations strategy that uses political satire to gain massive earned media during election seasons.

4.1 The Presidential Feline: Strategy of Satire and Earned Media

Morris has run for the highest office in the United States multiple times—1988, 1991/1992, 2012, and 2024. Each campaign was strategically aligned with the U.S. presidential election cycle. By placing the mascot within this high-profile political context, 9Lives generated immense visibility and PR value that conventional advertising could never match.

The first large-scale campaign in 1988 produced authentic campaign materials such as buttons, bumper stickers, and calendars. The 2024 campaign, titled *"Fourth Time's the Charm,"* focused on *paws-itivity* and aimed to unite the entire animal kingdom.

The strategic brilliance of these campaigns lies in their ability to cyclically renew the brand. By engaging in political satire, 9Lives positioned itself as witty, self-aware, and socially conscious—ensuring that the fifty-year-old mascot remained relevant for each new generation of voters.

Satirical election rallies in the 1980s blended humor with a social message, turning Morris once again into a national media phenomenon.

Satirical election campaign in the 1980s: “Morris for President” combined humor with a social message, turning the cat once again into a media phenomenon.

4.2 Analyzing the Campaign Platform: Blending Politics and Philanthropy

Each presidential platform served as a masterclass in converting brand messaging into political rhetoric, with every *paw-licy* rooted in the brand’s mission.

The 2024 platform rests on five core principles designed to help all pets live *The Good Life*:

Right to Prospurr: Every animal deserves a good home, good health, and good food—directly linking the campaign to adoption efforts.

Domestic Paw-licy: A humorous pledge to "keep the CAT in domesticated" by preserving 24/7 catnaps—an echo of Morris's original lazy, sardonic attitude.

Declaw Ridiculous Cat Laws: A tongue-in-cheek demand to repeal any rules that prevent cats from living their best lives.

4.3 Modern Campaign Tactics and Digital Engagement

The 2024 campaign integrated digital strategies by appointing internet celebrity *Doug the Pug* as Morris's campaign manager. This collaboration showcased the brand's adaptability—combining traditional mascot marketing with contemporary influencer culture.

It also served as a high-impact fundraising mechanism. During the vice-president search, pet owners were invited to nominate their animals. The winner not only received a prize but also selected a shelter to receive a $35,000 donation from 9Lives—roughly equivalent to half a million 9Lives meals.

The campaign's structure seamlessly merged humor and philanthropy. The witty promises drew attention, while the substantial donations demonstrated genuine corporate compassion. This ensured that the campaign was perceived not as cynical advertising, but as credible, purpose-driven activism.

5.
Synthesis and Strategic Conclusions

The case study of Morris the Cat demonstrates that when mascots are strategically conceived and ethically managed, they can serve as powerful brand ambassadors far beyond the lifespan of the original animal.

5.1 The Mechanism of Lasting Relevance: The Finicky-Philanthropic Paradox

Morris's enduring success rests on a strategic paradox: the brand skillfully merged its original hyperbole of pickiness—the "Clark Gable of Cats"—with a deep sense of philanthropy rooted in the rescue story.

Initially, the anthropomorphic celebrity persona distinguished 9Lives within a functional marketplace. After the death of Morris I, however, the company implemented a strict rule that all future Morris cats must be adopted from shelters. This renewal of ethical integrity transformed the mascot from a consumer-oriented icon into an authentic advocate for animal welfare.

The recurring political parodies served as highly effective media multipliers. By connecting the brand with cultural commentary, 9Lives generated vast PR attention while ensuring that the humorous coverage also conveyed the genuine charitable donations behind each "political initiative," such as the $35,000 shelter contribution during the 2024 campaign.

Looking back, Morris the Cat stands as a bridge between advertising nostalgia and modern social purpose—a legacy balanced between entertainment and empathy.

A look back at an era: Morris the Cat—from advertising star to cultural symbol. A legacy balanced between nostalgia and animal welfare.

5.2 Market Impact and Unquantified Success Metrics

Although no precise sales figures are available, cultural indicators confirm the mascot's profound market influence. The fact that Morris required a secretary to handle fan mail, starred in Hollywood films, and received global obituaries is qualitative proof of exceptional brand penetration. The campaign rightly ranks among the most successful in television history.

Quantifiable philanthropic results are equally impressive. Campaigns such as *Morris's Million Cat Rescue*, which helped one million cats find new homes, illustrate how mission-driven marketing can produce tangible outcomes. 9Lives thus defines itself not merely by product quality but by active participation in the animal-welfare ecosystem.

5.3 Strategic Recommendations for Long-Term Mascot Management

Three key insights emerge from the Morris case:

Embed the ethical origin story as brand identity.
Future brands should integrate the mascot's ethical backstory—such as shelter adoption—into their core narrative. This provides an inexhaustible source of credibility and philanthropic potential, protecting the mascot's legacy beyond mortality.

Leverage contextual media hijacking.
Brands should strategically tie satirical or event-driven campaigns to major cultural moments such as elections or festivals like SXSW. This generates massive earned media and sustains relevance across generations of consumers.

Mandate tangible charitable output.
High-profile campaigns must always be linked to verifiable donations or adoption initiatives—such as one million meals or $35,000 grants—transforming the mascot from a commercial spokesman into a socially responsible figurehead.

Morris the Cat's journey from rescued shelter cat to cultural symbol proves that ethical storytelling, humor, and consistency can create a brand legacy that thrives for more than half a century.

For your notes

Cat Man (Booklet's)